Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 30: Film Criticism

Guests: Kristen Lopez and Angelo Muredda

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

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Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, friend! Welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host Alice Wong. Today's episode is about film criticism with two disabled film critics, Kristen Lopez and Angelo Muredda. Kristen and Angelo will talk about how they became film critics, the challenges in being a disabled film critic, and why film criticism is so slow to change when it comes to inclusion of disabled people in the profession. We also discuss problematic disabled narratives and accessibility at film festivals and movie theaters. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we go!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

ALICE: So Kristen and Angelo, thank you so much for being on my podcast today. I was wondering if both of you could just introduce yourselves and say a little bit about what you do, where you're located, anything you wanna share. Kristen, you wanna go first?

KRISTEN LOPEZ: Sure! I'm Kristen Lopez. I am a Sacramento-based film critic and essayist who dreams of actually being located in the place where movies are made so that it would just be easier for me to do my job. I'm a film critic and writer who's been published on *The Daily Beast*, *Hollywood Reporter*, Roger Ebert. God, that sounds so weird that I get to say that 'cause I never thought that it would happen. So I generally write a lot about disability in cinema. It's a great job if you don't mind not getting paid a lot. [chuckles]

ALICE: Amen to that. How about you, Angelo?

ANGELO MUREDDA: I'm Toronto-based. I'm a film critic writing for a bunch of places, most regularly for *Cinema Scope*. I've also written for *The Walrus*, *NOW Magazine*, *Film Freak Central*, and some other places. I used to have a Rep Cinema column in *Torontoist*. I'm also a teacher. I'm doing a PhD in English at the University of Toronto, and I've also been teaching there. So I'm somewhere between a writer and a teacher most days.

[upbeat music]

How did you become involved in film criticism?

ALICE: So I guess this question goes out to both of you: how do you become involved in film criticism, and how does one really become a film critic?

KRISTEN: Ooh! I started my film criticism, it's been god, almost 11 years. I started right out of high school, just kind of like dabbling. And then it's only been the last like couple of years that I've actually started to get cash money for it. You know, it started out where it just, I wanted to be able to watch movies for free and not have to pay to go to the theater. So it's kind of a career that I started with really simple intentions, and it's transformed into actually becoming this person looking at film history and how little film changes despite what we may think about it.

ALICE: Amen to that. How about you, Angelo?

ANGELO: I think I've been writing formally since somewhere around 2011. I'm trying to remember when the movie *Crazy, Stupid, Love* with Steve Carell came out 'cause that was the first movie I formally reviewed. But I've been writing about film in some form another, I think, probably since high school, whether it was in the school newspaper or what have you. But mostly I think I wrote about films on the various blogs that I had and on Twitter. And I think the way I actually got into film criticism and writing about film more generally was through Twitter. I think I got retweeted once incidentally by Roger Ebert back when he was retweeting younger writers. He was doing a thing where he would retweet a few people every night at midnight, and I was one of the people he retweeted once. A bunch of local film people started following me. Bill Chambers, who edits for *Film Freak Central*, sent me a message at some point along the way after following me saying, "Hey. You know, the money in film criticism is bad, but maybe you'd wanna write for this site sometime." You know the money, such as it is, if there ever is any money.

ALICE: Yeah. You know, there's this issue of not a lot of money in film criticism. Because I think a lot of people have this notion that film criticism is something anyone can do because everybody has an opinion. So why pay for it? But there's so much more to that. What do you think?

KRISTEN: So for me at least, you took the words right out of my mouth. I think a lot of why film criticism is not a paid venture anymore is this belief that with the rise in blogs and Twitter and YouTube that really, anybody with a computer can do it. It's just telling somebody that you like a movie, or you don't and why. And that's really a very surface-level assessment. I know that when I write reviews—you know, I'm an English major; I have a Master's in English—so I'm always looking at every word. Is this the best word that describes my thoughts? How can I say these sentences in a way that's good to read? And that's not something that can be done by just any person who decides I'm gonna tell you why a movie is good or not.

ANGELO: Yeah. I mean it's an interesting question. I think you know, knowledge is important. Writing skills are important. Close reading skills, which you were speaking about doing an English degree and English Master's program. I also think voice is really important, and voice in the most abstract, metaphorical sense, you know? The distinct perspective that you, as a critic, bring to any film that you see is important: what you bring from your own life and your lived experience, but also from your knowledge of other things outside of film. So if you're someone who reads a lot, if you're someone who knows about architecture, if you're someone who knows about urban planning, all of those go some distance, I think, toward making you a good critic. Not necessarily only knowing your film history—although it certainly helps—but this idea that simply everyone is on a level playing field as a critic, I don't think is exactly right. But I do think a variety of different perspectives kind of make us good critics in different ways.

[upbeat music]

Roger Ebert's legacy and online networking for disabled film critics

ALICE: Both of you mentioned Roger Ebert. So would either of you like to share anything about what he means to you and kind of his legacy?

KRISTEN: Well, I think for many people—and as misplaced as it kind of is because of the circumstances—but I think for many people, Roger Ebert, later in his life when he got cancer, became the de facto disabled critic. And people talk a lot about oh, we need to have more representation of people with disabilities as actors, as screenwriters, as directors. But we don't talk about film critics and film writers.

ANGELO: Yeah. I do really admire a lot of his sort of non-fiction work in those last years in terms of disability and illness. I think he really found like such an interesting voice. I'm thinking particularly, he wrote an essay on food and on eating and on sort of dreaming about eating food when this became an issue for him and like an actual impairment that he had to sort of reorient his life around. And he was actually such an amazing writer about disability that it's kind of sad that he never really got a chance to put those skills to use, I think, in thinking about films about disability.

But yeah, just to speak to Kristen's point about the kind of solitude of the disabled film critic: it can be a really lonely environment if you don't know other disabled film critics, I find. Press screenings are very sterile environments for disabled critics particularly for wheelchair users who can't really navigate aisles and stairs: speaking for myself here, not speaking for others. These are networking opportunities that aren't really afforded to disabled critics the way they are afforded to other critics.

So just speaking for myself here, Twitter has been a huge equalizer, a huge venue for my voice to actually find people in a way that real life sort of hasn't been, you know? It's not to say that real life doesn't also present these opportunities when you meet other cinephiles out there in the world, but the Internet has always really been the place when I've found other disabled critics or other disabled people who maybe don't identify as critics but have interesting things to say about movies nonetheless.

KRISTEN: Oh yeah. I've told people before, you know, I have a slight addiction to social media, and most of it, I think, is because it is really the place where, especially, I think all writers can say this where we have the ability to network and to promote ourselves and to create a presence. For a long time, when I finally first got Twitter, I didn't bring up disability at all just because I didn't really wanna be known as the girl in the wheelchair. But I noticed that as I started to get more into writing about disability, if I would tweet something, I instantly got countless people commenting and retweeting and discussing.

Even now, anytime I mention movie theaters and accessibility, which is kind of my new cause célèbre, I get a huge following. And I think that's just because so many people with disabilities who are out there on social media—and especially who love film or who go to the movies—don't really feel like there's representation of, there's certainly not representation of them that's great onscreen, but knowing that there is a film critic or somebody who knows film that also is disabled, especially talking about movie theater accessibility in the last couple of months, it's been both heartening and disappointing to see so many people come together to say, "Yeah. Movie theaters suck."

Gap in diversity in film criticism

ALICE: And it seems to me like in general, the film criticism community is somewhat small and hard to break into. In general, what do you think are some of the gaps in terms of diversity within film criticism?

ANGELO: I think for some reason, there's still a kind of nervousness among critics to think about disability. For some reason, they don't have the language, or they feel they don't have the language. And it's something that they still kind of treat with a kind of hands-off sort of "put that over there" sort of attitude that doesn't really lend itself to actual conversation and discussion. And this relates to both how they actually see movies with disabled characters and think about them, and this might explain why you still see terms like "wheelchair bound" or "crazy" or things like this sort of still creeping into people's language. But I think it also plays into them thinking about the viability of actual film critics and thinking about critics with disabilities to talk about films about disability instead of just assuming that they have the expertise to talk about virtually anything.

KRISTEN: I think a lot of it—you know, Angelo brought up the language—and I think that's because a lot of the things that I see as tropes and that other people see as tropes haven't really been identified. Most people know what racism in movies looks like. They know what misogyny in movies looks like. They can disagree with those assessments, but they know it when they see it. Most people don't know ableism in movies. And so a lot of the terms that I've kind of coined and things that I've brought up regarding stereotypes that I've seen in cinema are things people have told me they didn't even realize were there until somebody pointed it out. And I was like, "Yeah, because there's not disabled critics telling you that these are stereotypes, you know? You don't really know that you're being pandered to if you don't really know what you're looking for." So I think a lot of, it's gonna take time, and of course, more voices to add to the conversation before we can really have people being able to notice like, oh, that's ableism.

Recommendations of disability and D/deaf representations onscreen

ALICE: So I guess related to this, let's talk about disability representation right now. Because I am curious, within the last few years, are there any particular films that you've seen that's done a pretty decent job in terms of disability or D/deaf representation in film? And are there any films that you feel that you really wanna recommend or that even you find problematic as well?

ANGELO: Sure. I think it's so rare that we get actual pure, good representations of disability that oftentimes, we're stuck sort of with films that do something that is interesting even if it's sort of accidentally interesting. I will say one film that has an interesting representation of disability that I haven't really seen before is Andrew Bujalski's film *Beeswax*—I don't know if you've seen that, Kristen—which is about twin sisters, one of whom runs a vintage dress shop. I'm forgetting in what American city it's in, but one of the twin sisters—and they're sort of playing versions of themselves—is a wheelchair user. And so a lot of it is just sort of following the romantic and personal lives of these sisters, one of whom happens to be disabled and a wheelchair user. But by necessity, when one is shooting a wheelchair user who is also a business person who is also sort of a romantic subject who's dealing with other people in the world, there's a lot of figuring out how to film this person going to work and sort of setting up shop or transferring in and out of the wheelchair, getting into bed, getting out of bed. And so there was something really interesting to me about kind of capturing the slice-of-life-ness about this character without making this character's disability into a metaphor as we often see or making this character a lesson about anything else. The character just sort of gets to be who she is, I think, as a result of her being so close to the actress who is playing her. So that's a representation that struck me as really interesting.

You know, other than that, I often go to documentaries as a place where we sometimes see good representations of disability. I was a juror this year for ReelAbilities Toronto, and there were some good films that came up in the process. *By Stanley For Stanley*, which is a Polish documentary. I'm forgetting what year it came out in, but it's probably somewhere on the docket soon in North America, which is about an amputee, a Polish amputee who's an artist kind of mentoring a young child who has a similar disability to himself and a similar name to himself and kind of finding some sort of interesting cross currents between them. *Keep the Change* was a really interesting romantic comedy that I think played—I forget where it played recently, if it was Tribeca or somewhere like that, but it's also at ReelAbilities—which is about two young autistic people in love. And it very much plays like a kind of contemporary romantic comedy that happens to be about autistic people who are, themselves, played by autistic actors. So it's so rare that we see these movies that are actually good representations that it feels like it's important to actually recognize them when we do see them.

KRISTEN: Yeah, I'm right there with you. You know, a lot of my recommendations tend to be vacillating like the "well, buts." There are classic films that I recommend people watch: stuff like *The Best Years of Our Lives*. *Freaks* is a good one. That I think in terms of if you wanna look at how film history has transformed disability, those are two that are very of their era. And I actually argue *Freaks* is very progressive for 1932, and it would've been more progressive had Tod Browning been allowed to do what he wanted. Studio ableism is what hampered that movie, but it's still very good. But in terms of modern movies, I tend to have to make concessions. And apparently, if you talk badly about some of these movies, you are labeled a horrible person. Which is why I no longer talk about *Stronger* on Twitter, because apparently, you're not allowed to besmirch that fine cinematic gem of a film.

But there are a couple of films that I recommend. I really liked *A Quiet Place* a couple months ago. That actually stars a deaf actress, Millicent Simmonds. And I really like how it uses American Sign Language in a way where had that movie not showed its hand and showed you that she was deaf so early into the movie, it would've easily, you know, I think people say, "Well, it's just a gimmick because she's a deaf actress." No! You could've easily done that movie without having the character be disabled. I think that's what makes it better is that she is.

And another one I recommend, and it's a very oddball choice, but I keep talking about it, is *Curse of Chucky* and *Cult of Chucky*. They're two of the—yes—they are two of the Child's Play films that came out in 2013 and 2017 respectively. The reason I bring them up is because so often, disabled films are not about women; they're mostly predominantly about white men. And it's very hard to find a movie about a disabled woman, disabled from birth, who is a sexual figure. And both of these films, yes, the actress is able-bodied in real life, but it's about a woman who is perceived as a sexual creature. She is independent, there's discussion about accessibility and gaslighting. And I actually interviewed the director of the film, Don Mancini, and when he was talking about making the movie, he was talking about how he had a disabled, a person with a disability, act as consultant so that they could get the character's movements right. And that this person corrected them on assumptions that they made about how a person with disabilities would do something. They researched wheelchairs to make sure that they had something that a real wheelchair user would use and not a big, bulky hospital chair, which I hate to see in movies. So I always give the movie a shout-out for that because that's somebody taking the time to actually do something.

I mean, there are plenty of other movies that I could tell you are awful, god-awful, never watch them, but those are the ones I say you should spend your time with if you wanna see something positive. I also recommend ABC's sitcom *Speechless*, which is actually—I don't say this about

any movies—I've never felt represented in cinema, but I feel represented by watching that show 'cause it touches on so many things that I can recall growing up. So those are some things that I'd recommend.

[bouncy music]

KRISTEN: I don't know Angelo, if you saw it, but when *Me Before You* came out, which was a movie that I told everybody was *horrible, horrible, horrible*. And how dare they make this movie, which doesn't do anything good for representation? And if anything, it just perpetuates these old stereotypes. And the fact that there were no disabled critics to interview the cast or the director only keeps the conversation one-sided. And I think that yeah, directors and screenwriters, even when they're trying to do something, I think when *Breathe* came out, the directors tried to explain that oh, they had the real children of the subject there. They tried their hardest to at least open the doors. Yeah, but that really doesn't fix things. And it also doesn't go to my central issue with representation, which is that you can look at any of the movies that are big box office films about disability, especially in the last maybe five or six years, and it's the same story. It is literally the same story. So we're not telling different stories about disability; we're telling the same story that is marketable to a mass audience.

ANGELO: [chuckles] In the case of *Me Before You* I think, you know, if anybody thinks that movie is lovely, they think it's lovely because they're not sure that we should exist. And they think that that is the noble end that some of us should meet. I think there's a real inability among some able-bodied film viewers to think of disabled people except as lessons about their own lives. And so speaking to your point, Kristen, about how we're seeing these same stories over and over again, this is a story, I think, that is very comforting for a lot of able-bodied people to see: this story that disability is this anxiety-inducing, terrifying thing that is out there in the world, but it's out there in order to make us understand ourselves a little bit better. (Ourselves being able-bodied people.) And so I think as long as people who don't have any vested interest in disability and don't have any lived experience with it are writing these narratives, and as long as there aren't more film critics who are disabled to kind of push back against these narratives, I think we're gonna keep getting these sorts of stories that are simply about us serving as lessons for other people or our suffering—beautiful as it may be—existing in the world so that other people can take something from it and kinda remake their lives in the process

I think on some level, these are just bad stories, right? And if you're gonna be a good critic, and you're gonna be a snob, you're gonna point out stories that are bad because they're old and tired. And this is one of those cases where directors just aren't making interesting movies about us. And so of course we're gonna complain about them.

Narrative tropes and non-disabled actors cripping up as disabled characters

ALICE: So I'm personally tired of seeing disabled characters played by non-disabled actors, especially in films that are Oscar bait. So as a film critic, is that important to you, or is it all about the story and the performance?

KRISTEN: So the concept of, I think it's the term Dominick Evans termed called "cripping up," [chuckles] which is the process of having an able-bodied actor play a disabled role. It didn't used to bother me, and then as more people got flak for brown face, you know, having white actors playing ethnic characters, I started to think like, well, yeah. It is a problem. I could maybe, maybe, maybe mitigate it if the scripts and the stories were telling something progressive. And again, even if they had a consultant on set, somebody who's lived that experience and can tell you, "This is what you're doing wrong. This is not correct," I would feel better about the process.

You know, I think when they were doing *A Quiet Place*, Millicent Simmonds actually taught everybody sign language, and she was there to tell them, “This is how a cochlear implant works,” things like that. That concept of at least making a passing attempt at authenticity. So I mean, I can mitigate it.

I know it’s a different process for everybody in terms of whether they accept it or not. But the fact that we’re seeing white, able-bodied actors, male actors, telling these stories about people hobbled late in life, it’s what I call the able-bodied buffer. That able-bodied audiences will not be able to “relate” to the grand mystery of disability unless they see this person as “normal” at some point in the film: it’s why we get able-bodied actors. And so when I tell people, you know, “We have able-bodied actors because the belief is well, the real person was able-bodied for a time; we wanna show that. So we need an able-bodied actor. It’s easier to make an able-bodied person disabled than a disabled person able-bodied.” But that goes to storytelling. You could tell a story about a person disabled from birth, but you choose not to. Why? Because you wanna get an able-bodied actor. So until we start getting rid of that storytelling device, we’re not gonna see this push towards actually getting disabled actors. It’s the excuse Hollywood makes to perpetuate that.

ANGELO: Cripping up bothers me, although I’m not as categorically against it, I think, as some people are. And I have complete sympathy and understanding for those who are, especially for actors who are categorically against it who are disabled. But you know, again, as I was saying about disabled narratives that are advanced by non-disabled filmmakers, on some level, as a critic, I’m a snob. And I believe in narratives that are good, and I believe in authenticity in performance. And I believe that oftentimes, when one is cripping up for a performance, whether it’s to fill up that shelf with various awards en route to an Oscar as some of these actors are clearly hoping to do, or whether it’s for other reasons, I think oftentimes, the performance just suffers because of all of this apparatus in the way of them learning how to be disabled based on what they heard from one expert. Or trying sitting in a wheelchair for a day or sort of reading about disabilities on Google for a couple hours. All of these things for me, unless they show up onscreen, they’re not necessarily a problem. But they often do show up onscreen. There often is a kind of phoniness to the performances because there’s a phoniness in the actual script.

So as you were saying, Kristen, I think this question of do we even need to see the pre-disability narrative or sort of the moment of transformation that so many of these films are fixated on? I’m glad that you called it a device because I think it’s such a tedious device. It’s such a boring way of filmmaking and storytelling that even just on the level of narrative, on the level of is this a film of quality? These films often suffer, I think, because they’re going out of their way to show this kind of moment of transformation where a non-disabled person becomes disabled. And in the end, they don’t really have anything that interesting to say about disability, about disability in the present, about actually being a disabled person in the world. So I think it results in a lot of bad filmmaking and in some cases, some bad acting as well. So you know, the part of me that is pro-disabled actors is, of course, “Screw all of these able-bodied actors who are giving these performances of disabled characters!” But the film snob in me and the film critic in me is also saying you know, “Enough with these narratives. Enough with these hammy performances. Just give me something that is real.”

[bouncy music]

Accessibility in theaters and at film festivals

ALICE: So I guess my final question is, let's talk about accessibility. Both of you probably go to a whole lot of film festivals. What can film festivals do to be more accessible for people with disabilities?

KRISTEN: You know, the first year I covered one of the film festivals—I go to the Turner Classic Movies film festival every year; this is my fifth year—and the first year, people fell over themselves at how ill-prepared they were 'cause they never really thought of a disabled person showing up as press. So that led to a lot of funny moments with red carpet press lines and stuff like that, which have gotten slowly better. What I notice festivals now are hitting a wall with is the problems that are with the venues that they're showing movies in. You know, at the film festival I was just at, most of the theaters that were in, are older. So you're dealing with a lot of retrofitting. And per the ADA, most of these theaters only have maybe about four to five handicapped spaces. That's wheelchair spaces with accompanying companion chairs. So especially movie theaters are failing when it comes to disability.

ANGELO: I think speaking to what you were saying, Kristen, accessibility is such an amorphous concept, I think, is part of why the bare minimum is often as much as these theaters are willing to do. If they put in an effort to meet these standards, whether it's the ADA or the AODA in Ontario here, there's this sense that they've done their job, or they've put in the effort. And so it's now up to us, the disabled people, to sort of be grateful for it.

You know, I've had similar experiences with festivals. I'm currently attending Hot Docs in Toronto, a major documentary film festival. I've attended TIFF for many years, both as a public customer and as press for the past few years. What you really see in the past few years, I think, these festivals struggling with figuring out their identities in lieu of the increasing push for accessibility. So how do people who are wheelchair users get into lineups when the line goes up the stairs or up escalators? Captioning is a nightmare. I think captioning is, in some ways, the next frontier for a lot of accessibility in theaters, and captioning is good for everyone, not just for people who need captioning. So I'm not sure that these things are necessarily improving so much as people are realizing that they need to start thinking about them. But I think we're kind of at a crisis point now where we really need to make our voices heard in order for people to see us as professionals and for people to understand that we can't just be expected to take what we are given. That we actually have to, as a society, make room for disabled professionals as well as disabled audience members.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

♪ how far will they go
oh yeah yeah
how far will they go
oh yeah yeah ♪

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You can also find links about Kristen and Angelo on our website.

The audio producer for this episode is Geraldine Ah-Sue. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Well, thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeeeee!

♪ rock it to the blast off
stop drop dance off ♪